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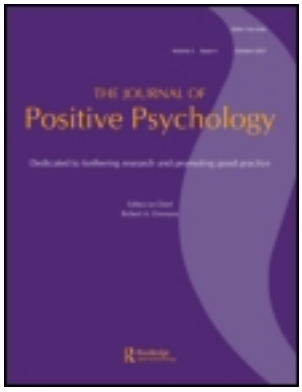

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Forgiveness and marital quality: Precursor or consequence in well-established relationships?

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Forgiveness and marital quality: Precursor or consequence in well-established relationships?

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Abstract
To examine potential causal relations between forgiveness and marital quality a sample of married couples ($N = 91$) provided data regarding forgiveness and marital quality on two occasions separated by a 12-month interval. Structural equation modeling was used to examine direction of effects. For women, paths emerged from forgiveness to marital quality and vice versa. For men, the direction of effect was from marital quality to forgiveness. The concurrent association between the two constructs mediated the longitudinal relationship between them for wives but not for husbands. These results are discussed in relation to an emerging body of theory and research on the role of forgiveness in marriage.

Keywords: *Forgiveness, marital quality, gender*

Introduction

The benefits of forgiving for individual well-being have been documented across a variety of domains including physical health (for reviews see Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Worthington & Scherer, 2004), mental health (for reviews see Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Toussaint & Webb, 2005), and life satisfaction (e.g., Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). Given the association between individual and relationship health (Fincham & Beach, 1999), this raises the question of whether forgiveness might not have similarly beneficial implications for close relationships such as marriage. A small body of research has begun to address this question (for reviews see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005, 2006) fueled by the view of many researchers and clinicians that forgiveness is the cornerstone of a successful marriage (e.g., Worthington, 1994). This belief underpins the development of several new marital interventions that emphasize forgiveness, particularly in the context of marital infidelity (e.g., Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005). Thus far research evidence supports this view as forgiveness has been linked to several key constructs in the marital domain, including conflict resolution, relationship enhancing attributions, and greater commitment. However, the most robust finding in this emerging literature documents a positive association between forgiveness and marital quality.

Although central to the emerging literature on forgiveness and marriage, several issues concerning the association between forgiveness and marital quality remain unresolved. Perhaps one of the most important is whether the relation is causal and, if so, the direction of possible causal effects. To date, however, the potential reciprocal relationship between marital quality and forgiveness within marriage remains unexplored. A second issue is the extent to which gender is related to the forgiveness–marital quality association, an important consideration in view of suggestive findings that women are more forgiving than men (e.g., Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; Karremans et al., 2003). Likewise, wives may be more sensitive to relationship problems (Markus & Oyserman, 1989), suggesting the potential for gender-related patterns in the relationship between marital quality and forgiveness. To address these issues, the present study examines longitudinal data collected from husbands and wives on the relation between forgiveness and marital quality.

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The association between forgiveness and marital quality

Concurrent association. A number of studies document a robust association between forgiveness and marital satisfaction (for reviews see Fincham et al., 2005, 2006). No matter how robust the correlation between forgiveness and marital quality, however, it does not speak to the issue of direction of effects. A more promising means of addressing this issue is to examine the association longitudinally.

Longitudinal association. Paleari, Regalia and Fincham (2005) examined forgiveness in longer-term Italian marriages (mean length of marriage = 18.8 years) at two points in time spanning a 6-month period. Among other things, they tested a model in which earlier forgiveness predicted later satisfaction only indirectly through concurrent forgiveness. Interestingly they found support for this indirect link but only for husbands. Although the reason for this gender-related finding is unclear it may be related to the assessment of forgiveness for different events across the two points in time. This resulted in low stability coefficients and likely underestimated the longitudinal relation between forgiveness and marital quality. A further limitation of this study is that it did not test nonrecursive models that might capture possible reciprocal effects between forgiveness and marital quality. This is important, as a complete account of the association between forgiveness and marital quality will have to encompass the potential bidirectional interplay between them. In addition, there is reason to expect that longitudinal relations might vary as a function of gender.

Gender and the forgiveness–marital quality association

An issue that tends to be neglected in forgiveness research is the relationship between gender and forgiveness. As regards relationships, the magnitude of the cross-sectional relation between forgiveness and marital quality does not often differ for men and women (e.g., Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004). This is somewhat surprising in view of gender role differences for women and men.

Gender roles. Gender roles give rise to clear differences in expectations. Women are rated more favorably on helpfulness, kindness, compassion, and ability to devote oneself to another, and women display more emotional support for others (Eagly, 1987). Because gender roles are often internalized, women's gender roles may lead them to place greater emphasis on caring for others regardless of whether or not their own needs are being met and to sacrifice more to ''save'' a relationship (Lerner, 1987). Indeed, women are perceived as being more relationship-oriented than men (e.g., Markus & Oyserman, 1989) and so may feel (or have forced upon them) responsibility for the resolution of relationship difficulties. Not surprisingly, there is some evidence that women are more forgiving, on average, than are men (e.g., Exline et al., 2004; Karremans et al., 2003). The result may be a stronger tendency for women relative to men to forgive when something goes wrong in their close relationships.

In contrast, the male gender role is more consistent with activity and displays of anger and retaliation (Kuebli & Fivush, 1992). Men are more likely to use direct influence strategies to ''make'' others change (e.g., coercion, appeal to expertise; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986). The internalization of these expectations may lead men to view interpersonal conflict resulting from partner transgressions in terms of competition and ''winning'' or lead them to withdraw, or attempt to withdraw, from the situation. Such tendencies should make men less likely to view forgiveness as an option when it comes to transgressions. In addition, it may lead men to view forgiveness in mixed or negative terms when it is selected as an option, obscuring short-term beneficial effects of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction.

Towards greater understanding of forgiveness in relationships

Researchers need to address conceptual and methodological issues to advance understanding of the role of forgiveness in relationships such as marriage. Each is therefore addressed in turn.

Conceptual hygiene. Numerous conceptions of forgiveness exist among both laypersons (e.g., Kearns & Fincham, 2004) and professionals (see Worthington, 2005) and it is therefore important to distinguish forgiveness from related constructs. Forgiveness can be distinguished from constructs such as denial (which involves an unwillingness to perceive the injury), condoning (which removes the offence and hence the need for forgiveness), pardon (which can only be granted by a representative of society such as a judge), forgetting (which removes awareness of the offence from consciousness; to forgive is more than never thinking about the offence), and reconciliation (which restores a relationship and is therefore a dyadic process) (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Freedman, 1998).

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McCullough et al. (1997) argue that most conceptions of forgiveness build on the view that forgiveness entails a prosocial motivational change towards an offender following a transgression. With few exceptions, this change is investigated in terms of reduced negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors towards the offender (e.g., Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998). Most of what is known about forgiveness therefore rests on inferences made from the absence of a negative motivational orientation towards the transgressor. By considering only the reduction of negative motivations, however, prior research overlooks what may be considered the essence of forgiveness. Several philosophers see as fundamental to forgiveness ''an attitude of real goodwill towards the offender as a person'' (Holmgren, 1993, p. 34; see also Downie, 1965). It is this positive dimension of benevolence that situates forgiveness most strongly as a construct in positive psychology. In light of this consideration, and to redress the prior emphasis on unforgiveness, the present study focuses on this positive conceptualization of forgiveness.

Improving study designs and data analytic strategies. The study designs and data analytic strategies used to date in marital forgiveness research limit the discovery of potential causal relations. As noted, cross-sectional investigations dominate research on the relationship between forgiveness and marital quality, whereas longitudinal designs provide a better method for analysing change as they yield information on cross-sectional and longitudinal variation. Because the predictor variable often correlates cross-sectionally with the predicted variable it is important to control for this association in the study of change over time. Although the regression analyses most frequently used in panel designs address this issue, parameter estimates for predictor variables do not control for other paths posited in the causal system. Structural equation modeling (SEM) circumvents this difficulty by simultaneously estimating all parameters in a causal system. We therefore use SEM to examine the relation between forgiveness and marital quality, at two points in time separated by a 12-month interval.

Method

Participants

Participants were 91 married couples who were participating with their adolescent daughters in an ongoing study of family relationships. Families were recruited through a local middle school. Letters were mailed to families with a 14-year-old daughter at a local school. Families were instructed to return a postage paid postcard if they were interested in participating. Thirty-one families were recruited in this manner and the remainder were recruited through advertisements in the local media. Interested families were asked to call the project. All interested families were screened to determine whether they met the eligibility criteria used for the study. Eligibility criteria included being an intact family with a 14-year-old daughter, the ability to read and comprehend questionnaires, and the ability to participate in computer tasks. Families whose members had severe learning disabilities that would impair their performance were excluded.

Measures

Marital quality. Marital quality was assessed using the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT). The MAT is a 15-item self report questionnaire that asks individuals to evaluate several dimensions of their marital functioning, including the extent to which they confide in their partner, the amount of leisure time spent together, and the extent to which the individual and their partner agree on important issues in marriage, such as friends, sex relations, and family finances. Response formats differ across items and include rating scales as well as multiple choice options. This widely used measure reliably discriminates nondistressed spouses from spouses with documented marital problems, has adequate reliability (split half = 0.90), and correlates with clinicians' judgments of marital discord (Crowther, 1985).

Forgiveness. Following a common practice in prior research we used an offence specific assessment of forgiveness (Fincham et al., 2005; Karremans et al., 2003; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Forgiveness was assessed in relation to an incident in the past 6 months in which the respondent was asked to ''describe a time when you felt most mistreated or hurt by your partner''. They were asked to describe whatever their partner said or did that had left them ''upset, angry, or hurt''. The respondent was asked to recall the event and describe it to the research assistant in as much detail as possible. These events involved ones that included such things as disclosure of private family information to someone outside of the family, infidelity, being the target of a partner's abusive language, and breaking of an important promise. They then wrote down a very brief description of the event following which they rated the amount of hurt they experienced on a 9-point scale ranging from ''very little hurt'' to ''most hurt

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ever felt'': husbands averaged 4.7 ($SD = 2.36$) and wives averaged 5.8 ($SD = 2.03$). Spouses also indicated the extent to which three statements characterized their response to the transgression (e.g., ''I am able to act as positively towards my partner now as I was before this happened'', ''I soon forgave my partner'', ''It was easy to feel warmly again toward my partner'': coefficient alpha, husbands = 0.79, wives = 0.77 at both times 1 and 2). They indicated their ratings on a 6-point scale anchored by ''strongly agree'' at one end and ''strongly disagree'' at the other. The scores were summed across items with higher scores reflecting more forgiveness.

At the Time 2 assessment, spouses were reminded that when they visited previously they had identified during an interview a time when they felt most mistreated or hurt by their partner. They were also reminded that they had written down a brief description of the event following the interview. They were then provided with their written description of the event and were given the following instruction, ''Take a minute or two to refresh your memory about this event. Try to recall it in as much detail as possible. Do not proceed until you have it clearly in mind. Then answer the following questions''. They then rated the amount of hurt experienced and the three questions that assessed the extent to which they had forgiven the partner for the transgression. The amount of hurt experienced did not differ significantly from that reported 12 months earlier, husbands = 5.21 ($SD = 2.45$), wives = 5.62 ($SD = 2.28$).

Procedure

Families were invited to attend a laboratory session during which spouses individually completed consent forms, demographic forms, and the two questionnaires reported in this study. Additional data were collected but are beyond the scope of this paper. At the end of the session the families were debriefed and paid US$75. At Time 2, approximately 12 months later, spouses visited the laboratory and completed again the measures described earlier.

Analytic strategy

Following an analytic strategy used by Fincham, Harold, Beach and Osborne (1997), we estimated parameters in a series of structural equation models, to (a) examine possible direction of effects between forgiveness and marital quality over time, (b) determine whether these relations are mediated by the concurrent association between the predictor and predicted variable, and (c) examine possible bidirectional relations between the variables. In doing so, we pay particular attention to gender in the relation between forgiveness and marital quality. Finally, we used Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML: Little & Rubin, 1987; Schafer, 1997) to compute estimates and standard errors as there were some missing data values. Parameter estimates from FIML provide less biased information than ad hoc procedures such as listwise deletion, pairwise deletion, or imputation of means (Schafer, 1997). For these reasons, FIML was used in this study.

Results

Data were obtained from 91 couples at Time 1. Husbands were 43.3 years old on average ($SD = 4.2$) and predominantly Caucasian (97%). Forty-four percent reported graduating high school and 52% reported a college or post-graduate education. Wives were 41.1 years old on average ($SD = 4.8$) and predominantly Caucasian (98%). Thirty-nine percent reported graduating high school and 53% reported a college or post-graduate education. Mean family income was in the range of US$40,000 to US$50,000. A total of 84 couples participated at Time 2; two couples had moved out of state and five couples declined to participate. Nonparticipants did not differ from participants in terms of demographics or the variables studied.

The correlations among the forgiveness and marital quality variables appear in Table I together with their means and standard deviations. It can be seen that both forgiveness and marital quality were quite stable. In addition, marital quality and forgiveness are clearly related to each other whether

Table I. Correlations, means, and standard deviations of measures of forgiveness and marital quality for husbands (above diagonal) and wives (below diagonal).

	For – T1	For – T2	MQ – T1	MQ – T2	Mean	*SD*
For – T1		0.53	0.32	0.36	5.06	0.93
For – T2	0.68		0.43	0.46	5.18	0.96
MQ – T1	0.33	0.53		0.64	116.46	21.33
MQ – T2	0.44	0.64	0.65		116.34	21.68
Mean	4.98	5.52	119.70	117.0		
SD	1.0	0.96	18.90	24.9		

For = forgiveness, MQ = marital quality, $n = 84$. All correlations significant at $p < 0.05$.

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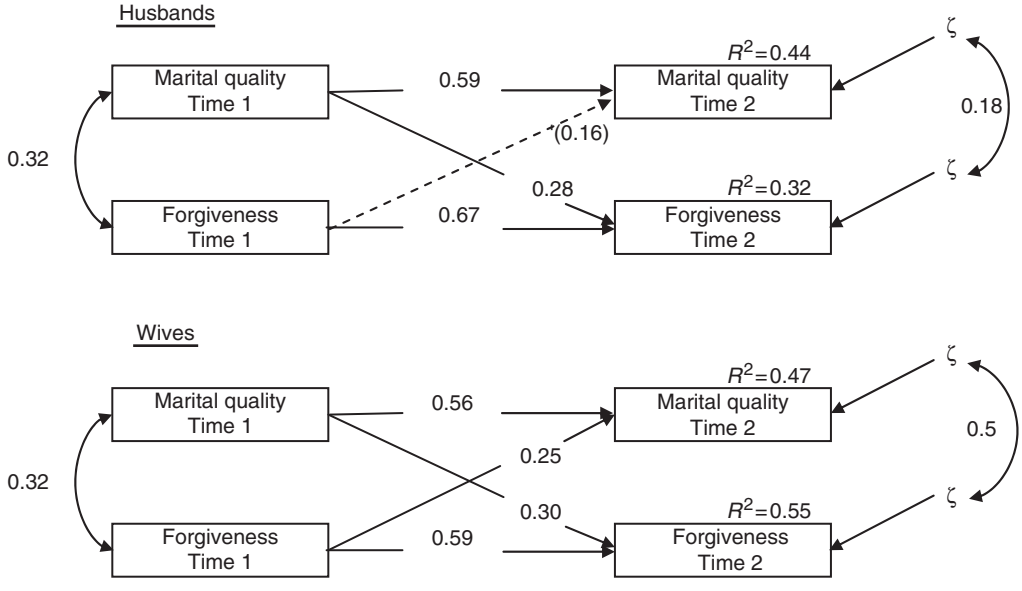
examined cross-sectionally or longitudinally. As regards correlations between husband and wife data, husbands and wives' degrees of forgiveness were unrelated $r = 0.06$, $p > 0.10$, as was also the case for reported hurt, $r = 0.12$, $p > 0.10$. Their levels of marital quality were, however, related, $r = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$. Finally, examination of the types of events reported did not appear to be gender related or to differ within couples.

Replicating past findings, degree of hurt was related to forgiveness for both husbands, $r = -0.32$, $p < 0.05$, and wives $r = -0.41$, $p < 0.05$, and to wives' marital quality, $r = -0.23$, $p < 0.05$. The greater the degree of hurt, the less the forgiveness. Using the traditional cut off score of 100 on the MAT to form distressed and nondistressed groups, we examined whether the groups differed on forgiveness and degree of hurt. The distressed group was significantly less forgiving for both husbands (mean: distressed = 4.63, nondistressed = 5.33, $t = 2.93$, $p < 0.05$) and wives (mean: distressed = 4.58, nondistressed = 5.27, $t = 2.93$, $p < 0.05$). However, distressed and nondistressed groups did not differ on degree of hurt reported for either spouse.

In light of the association between degree of hurt and forgiveness, the models reported below were estimated with and without controlling for the amount of hurt the respondent reported. The findings regarding the direction of effects between forgiveness and satisfaction were substantially the same. For ease of presentation, the models involving only forgiveness and satisfaction are reported.

Are forgiveness and marital quality related over time? Cross-lagged stability models

Cross-lagged stability models (see Figure 1) allow examination of longitudinal relations between constructs while controlling for their stability. Significant cross-lagged effects reflect the presence of a relationship beyond that which can be accounted for by the stability of the constructs and the magnitude of their association at Time 1. Structural equation modeling (using Amos 5.0) based on maximum likelihood estimation was used to obtain parameter estimates in a cross-lagged stability model using manifest measures of each construct. An alternative is to use item parcels or full latent variable modeling, an option that is preferred when constructs subsume a complex, multidimensional measurement model with unknown or variable potential for systematic measurement bias and unknown shared variance between items assessing different constructs. In contrast, manifest indicators tend to be preferred when variables are being assessed with established, unidimensional measures of constructs (Fincham, et al. 2000), partly because manifest indicators may also facilitate construct-level comparisons with extensive past research using the manifest variables. Although these considerations pointed towards the approach we adopted, in the final analysis, it was dictated by our sample size which limited the number of parameter estimates that could be computed reliably.



For all coefficients not shown in parentheses, $p < 0.01$.

Figure 1. Cross-lagged stability models.

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Figure 1 shows the estimates obtained for husbands and for wives. Because this is a fully saturated model without any degrees of freedom, it fits the data perfectly. In this and subsequent models, the interest is in parameter estimates rather than model fit. Both cross-lagged relations yielded significant parameter estimates for wives whereas for husbands only the path linking earlier satisfaction to later forgiveness was significant.

Are longitudinal relations between forgiveness and marital quality mediated by their concurrent relation? Recursive models

Simple recursive models allow examination of the extent to which cross-lagged effects reflect primarily shorter-term concurrent effects and the extent to which they reflect processes that unfold over longer time periods. When previously significant cross-lagged effects are reduced or eliminated using simple recursive models, it suggests that these effects are mediated through the current level of the predictor variable. Conversely, when cross-lagged effects remain significant, this suggests a longer causal time frame.

Because longitudinal relations may be mediated by concurrent relations between the variables, we examined two sets of simple recursive models. First, we examined a model with a path from Time 2 marital quality to Time 2 forgiveness while controlling for earlier marital quality. The path from marital quality at Time 2 to forgiveness at Time 2 was significant for husbands (0.31) and wives (0.62). Also, for both husbands and wives, the previously significant longitudinal relation between marital quality and later forgiveness was no longer significant. The Sobel test shows that there is a significant indirect effect for wives but not for husbands, indicating that concurrent marital quality mediated the effect of earlier marital quality on later forgiveness for wives, $z = 4.74$, but not husbands, $z = 1.77$. Second, given the significant cross-lagged effect from earlier wives' forgiveness to later marital quality, we examined a model with a path from Time 2 forgiveness to Time 2 marital quality while controlling for earlier forgiveness. Again, the previously significant longitudinal relation between forgiveness and later marital quality was no longer significant and a Sobel test showed that concurrent forgiveness mediated the longitudinal relationship for wives, $z = 5.04$. In the analyses just reported, the paths linking the Time 2 variables were significant, providing support for the view that the path linking forgiveness and marital quality may be bidirectional. Simple recursive models do not, however, allow estimation of bidirectional effects.

Is the relationship between forgiveness and marital quality bidirectional? Non-recursive models

To examine possible bidirectional or synchronous effects between satisfaction and depression, a non-recursive model was estimated (see Figure 2). In order to identify a synchronous effects model, several conditions need to be satisfied. The present model satisfies these conditions in that earlier measures of forgiveness and marital quality are presumed to be predetermined variables and thereby uncorrelated with the disturbance terms in both Time 2 equations, and both cross-lagged effects are constrained to be zero.

These analyses yielded results that were consistent with those obtained in the cross-lagged stability models. Again, for women, support was obtained for bidirectional effects as the paths between time 2 forgiveness and time 2 marital quality were both significant. For men, only the path from later marital quality to later forgiveness was significant.

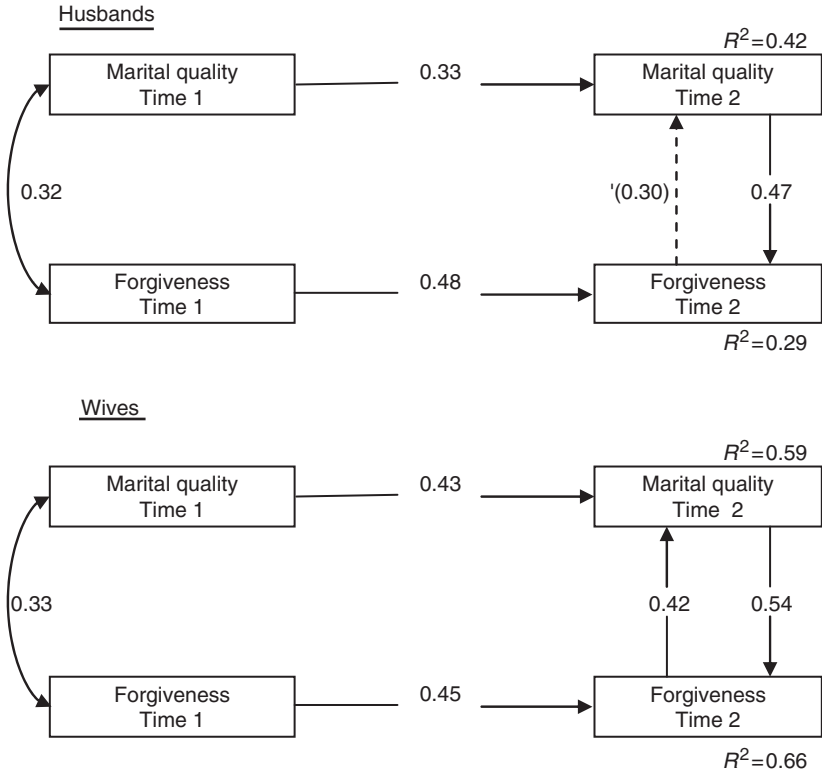
Does spouse forgiveness influence later partner marital quality and vice versa?

To examine longitudinal interspouse effects, the cross-lagged stability models were rerun using partner instead of own reports of forgiveness or marital quality. Two effects emerged above and beyond significant stability coefficients: there was an effect from husband marital quality to later wife forgiveness, and there was an effect from wife forgiveness to husbands' later marital quality.

Discussion

In addressing the relation between forgiveness and marital quality, this study replicated previous research documenting an association between the two constructs. Consistent with prior correlational studies, for both husbands and wives significant concurrent correlations were found between forgiveness and marital quality (range from 0.33 to 0.64). However, the study is among the first to show significant longitudinal correlations between forgiveness and marital quality. The existence of such a longitudinal association raises questions about direction of effects. These questions were pursued by examining parameter estimates yielded by a series of complementary models.

The models examined demonstrate that, although the relationship found between forgiveness and marital quality can vary as a function of the manner in which the data are examined, there is impressive and theoretically important consistency across various model specifications. At the substantive level, the results of this study suggest that there are



For all coefficients not shown in parentheses, $p<0.01$.

Figure 2. Non-recursive models.

theoretically important bidirectional effects between marital quality and forgiveness for wives. For husbands, however, the data suggest a unidirectional effect from marital quality to forgiveness. Even the cross-spouse effect suggested a unidirectional effect from husband satisfaction to later wife forgiveness.

Because women may be less likely than men to adopt a ''dismissive'' style in response to relationship difficulties and are often perceived as being more relationship-oriented than men, and so may feel (or have forced upon them) greater responsibility for the resolution of relationship difficulties, one might expect more interplay between their forgiveness and marital quality. In particular, if one views forgiveness as an effortful strategy to resolve relationship difficulties, one might expect greater potential for forgiveness to be engaged by women in the aftermath of relationship transgression and to influence the future of the relationship. In contrast, men may withdraw from the relationship to a greater extent than is true for women in response to a partner transgression and therefore be less likely to forgive. This would lead men to be less likely to engage in effortful activity, such as forgiveness, and so less likely to influence the future of their relationship in this manner. If correct, the interplay between forgiveness and marital quality would likely be weaker for men. This appears to fit nicely with the current pattern of findings. In particular, there is evidence that women's propensity to forgive is predictive of both their own and their partner's future marital quality in a manner that is not true for husband's propensity to forgive. Rather, for husbands it is increased marital quality that appears to lead to greater propensity to forgive.

Although the pattern of findings is linked to gender, caution is needed in interpreting these findings. Here it is important to keep in mind the cross-lagged models where forgiveness predicts later marital quality for wives but not husbands. Specifically, the magnitude of the path from earlier forgiveness to later satisfaction is only slightly smaller for husbands (0.16) than it is for wives (0.25). Although the gender linked findings are therefore only suggestive of a possible difference, they point to a potentially fruitful avenue of inquiry that requires further investigation.

When interpreting these results it is also important to remember that the appropriate time frame within which to observe causal effects between forgiveness and marital quality is not known. This creates some difficulty in estimating the magnitude of any hypothesized direction of effects between forgiveness and marital discord. Because use of the correct lag

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should result in the largest estimated effect, any causal relation between the two variables may be seriously underestimated if our estimate of causal effect consists of only the cross-lagged relationship between the variables measured across an arbitrary time interval. When the observation period is longer than the temporal lag for the effect to occur, the relationship is often best approximated by two-way causal relationships (Fisher, 1970). Accordingly, a contrast of effect estimates for cross-lagged and non-recursive models allows for some estimate of the time frame over which effects may occur.

It is therefore instructive to notice that the effect of marital quality on forgiveness is greater when estimated in the non-recursive model (0.54 and 0.47) than in the cross-lagged model (0.30 and 0.28). This suggests that the effect of marital quality on forgiveness may occur over a relatively shorter time frame than 12 months. However, the difference in non-recursive and cross-lagged models for the effect of forgiveness on marital quality (wives only) is somewhat less pronounced (0.42 vs. 0.25). Although speculative, this may suggest a relatively longer time frame for the effect of forgiveness on marital satisfaction than vice versa. This has implications for theory building by focusing attention on mechanisms that unfold over time, in the case of forgiveness influencing marital quality and focusing attention on more rapid acting mechanisms, in the case of marital quality affecting forgiveness.

The patterning of effects obtained in this study is compatible with any of three nonspurious patterns of causation. First, only some spouses show forgiveness in the context of higher marital quality, but this reaction is sufficiently large to produce observable group effects. Second, the relationship between forgiveness and marital quality is general but non-linear, leading to threshold effects that are underestimated by linear analytic approaches. Third, the effect of marital quality on forgiveness is general and linear, but modest in magnitude. A similar set of plausible patterns could be identified for the effect of wife forgiveness on marital quality. The precise clinical implications of the results await further investigation of these competing models as programs of intervention or prevention derived from them would differ. Moreover, replication with samples experiencing severe transgressions and marital discord would further enhance the generalizability of the results. Finally, documentation of concurrent and longitudinal associations between forgiveness and marital quality points to the need for research on the mechanisms that lead to these associations.

It is also worth noting that offence-specific assessments of forgiveness, though widely used in forgiveness research, raise an important question. To what extent can data based on single events be generalized? Because this assessment approach typically focuses on the most hurtful event in a given time frame it also raises questions about whether results are generalizable to less hurtful events. The findings of the present study should therefore be viewed as tentative pending their replication with measures that include multiple events.

Notwithstanding these caveats, the results offer both methodological and substantive insights regarding the forgiveness–marital quality association. From a methodological standpoint, the results suggest that parameter estimates for effects hypothesized in any causal model of marital quality on forgiveness may vary as a function of model specification. Because the ''correct'' lag time for marital quality effects is not known, it seems prudent to hypothesize that, to varying degrees, all parameter estimates underestimate the ''true'' magnitude of the relationship between marital quality and forgiveness.

Conclusion

The current data help advance understanding of the forgiveness–marital quality association at the substantive level by indicating important bidirectional effects between marital quality and forgiveness among wives, and by identifying possible divergence in the time frame required for effects of forgiveness on marital quality compared to that required for marital quality to influence forgiveness. They also add to emerging data to support attention to forgiveness in working with couples, and thereby have a role to play in recent forgiveness interventions that integrate research, theory and clinical experiences in working with couples (e.g., Gordon et al., 2005). Finally, they draw attention to the potentially fruitful integration of positive psychology and research on intimate relationships such as marriage (see Fincham, in press).

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